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## Work on 'virtual fence' to start soon

**Border barrier to use cameras, electronics to catch smugglers**

**By Arthur H. Rotstein**

*THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Federal officials plan to start construction within weeks on a new "virtual fence" along the U.S.-Mexico border that they expect to stretch across most of the nearly 2,000-mile frontier within five years.

The executive director of the Homeland Security Department's Secure Border Initiative program office told The Associated Press in an interview that the first permanent towers holding sensors, cameras and communications gear to detect drug smugglers and illegal immigrants will be built along 53 miles of the Mexican border in Southern Arizona. Towers spanning practically all the remaining 320 miles of the state's southern border will follow.

New Mexico will be targeted next for virtual fencing, said Mark Borkowski, a Customs and Border Protection official in charge of the program, followed by California and most of Texas, all over the next five years.

"Construction should start imminently," said Borkowski. "We're in the final throes of convincing ourselves that the engineering is fine."

Depending on funding, the whole Southwestern border except for about 200 miles around Big Bend National Park in Texas would be covered by 2014, Borkowski said. That area would also eventually be outfitted with the system.

"It's in our list of to-dos," Borkowski said. "It's just such a rugged area, we think it's the last place we need to do."

Plans for a virtual fence on the Canadian border aren't fully developed.

The electronic monitoring is meant to supplement pedestrian fencing and vehicle barriers that have been built along 624 miles of the border. About 46 more miles of fencing are planned.

Borkowski declined to estimate what the entire Southwestern virtual fence project will cost. "I'm not sure I've got that all negotiated," he said. "It's not a number that I want to put out."

But Adam Comis, press secretary for the House Homeland Security Committee, said the cost is estimated to be about \$6.7 billion by 2014.

The primary contractor, the Boeing Co., has received about \$600 million so far for technology development.

As of a year ago, Boeing also had received some \$260 million for construction of physical border fences and vehicle barriers, primarily in Arizona and Texas.

"Our goal is to deliver a system and capabilities that will help agents do their jobs safely and effectively," Boeing said in a statement.

The virtual fence is designed to use radar and cameras with about a six-mile range, including nighttime infrared devices and other technologies, to detect smuggling attempts. The sensors will be able to distinguish people from animals and allow operators to direct Border Patrol agents to intruders.

The system is the follow-up to a prototype virtual fence strung across 28 miles of the Southern Arizona border. The prototype has been in use since late 2007. Borkowski said the new system is essentially a final product that can be enhanced.

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The Government Accountability Office told Congress last year that the prototype fence did not fully meet expectations and its design wouldn't be used as the basis for future developments. It is still operating, though, and its portable towers will be used in test scenarios elsewhere.

"I am hopeful that the department and its contractors have learned from previous failed attempts and will apply those lessons to the deployment (of the new system). We will be watching closely until SBI net is complete," Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee and a critic of the initial virtual fence efforts, said via e-mail Thursday.

The decision to move forward with construction was greeted with caution by a border security advocacy group.

"They've spent a lot of money and time on one (virtual fence) that didn't work very well, so there's reason to be skeptical," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform. He said the high-tech devices aren't a substitute for the promised actual fencing.

The first new towers will be spread across 23 miles near the border town of Sasabe, and another 30 miles along the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

The four-legged steel towers will have 2,500-square-foot footprints. From 40 to 120 feet tall depending on terrain, they will be perched on concrete block pads inside fenced compounds, equipped with solar battery rechargers and backup generators.

Several will be deployed away from the border along known smuggling routes, Borkowski said.

Arizona has been the primary entry point for illegal immigrants from Mexico for at least a decade.

Borkowski said the Border Patrol has had only a small role in designing and customizing the new program, although the agency will be its primary user.

He said he's not convinced that agency officials will be satisfied with the outcome. "We actually want the Border Patrol to use this system and gain experience and then to tell us what they want us to add to the system," he said.

When the prototype system came under criticism, federal and Boeing officials emphasized that it was built with off-the-shelf equipment to demonstrate that the concept would work. But they acknowledged that the components proved less than ideal.

The Border Patrol continued using the prototype as the new system was developed. Jenny Burke, a spokeswoman for Borkowski, said there have been 5,196 apprehensions as a direct result of sightings since the end of September 2007.

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